

South Benton
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From Page:
2
9/21/2005
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108-172-134-145 Iowa Great Places

In the past few months, you may have heard the terms "community solutions" and more recently, "Iowa Great Places." A few folks around town, sometimes as many as 35, have become quite familiar with both terms.

For the past several months, a group of us have been meeting each month with a consultant. This Community Solutions Task Force has been exploring several ways Belle Plaine can continue to grow and improve. That process still has several months to go.

More recently, a part of that group has been working feverishly on a project that may bring about even more big changes to our fair city. The group has been preparing a presentation for the Great Places Citizens Advisory Board. Our local group has an hour to convince this board that Belle Plaine would be a great place for one of three pilot projects for the Iowa Great Place Initiative.

According to the Great Places web site, "Great Places is a Vilask-Pederson Administration initiative designed to promote bold thought, innovation and entrepreneurship to cultivate the unique and authentic qualities that make places in Iowa so special. The initiative turns the state into a new kind of partner with Iowans – demystifying government, combining resources for impact and delivering results."

The competition is indeed stiff. The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, the lead agency for this project, received 145 invitations from 91 of the state's 99 counties. That list has been cut in half, but Belle Plaine is still in the running.

The work involved in preparing this presentation is extensive. It requires those involved to take a close look at our city and determine what we need to have to be considered a "Great Place." They also have to take a closer look at many things that a lot of us take for granted about our city and point them out to the advisory board to convince board members that we already have a lot to offer.

After we submitted our original letter of interest, a couple of state officials were sent to our August Community Solutions meeting to help us develop the vision for our community. It was a very informative two-hour meeting as the Great Places consultants offered several good suggestions and were also quite complimentary on what we had already accomplished and what Belle Plaine has to offer.

In our presentation, we must show the committee our strengths in several areas: "a unique sense of place, engaging experiences, a rich social fabric, a vital economy, a pleasing environment, a strong foundation and a creative culture." The local committee has prepared comments on each of these areas, listing what we have done, what we need to do and how the Great Places team can help.

Next week, Belle Plaine makes its presentation to the Great Places Advisory Board. Then in October, announcement will be made of the three applications that have been accepted for the first year of this project.

Many of the communities who dropped out of the running for the designation may have had the mistaken impression that selection would mean a pot of gold for their communities. But while there may not be any automatic huge grant automatically associated with the designation, neither is being named an Iowa Great Place solely something that a city can put on its letterhead.

The governor's order directs no fewer than 18 state agencies to offer their existing resources in helping the chosen Great Places achieve their visions. The departments span a wide range of state government and include: Department of Cultural Affairs, Board of Regents, Department of Administrative Services, Department of Corrections, Department of Economic Development, De-



partment of Human Rights/Latino Affairs, Department of Human Rights/Persons with Disabilities, Department of Human Rights/Status of African Americans, Department of Management, Department of Natural Resources, Department of Public Health, Department of Transportation, Institute for Decision Making, University of Northern Iowa, Iowa Alcoholic Beverages Division, Iowa Finance Authority, Iowa Lottery, State Library of Iowa and Workforce Development.

Their mandate is to become a one-stop shop for the Great Places to identify appropriate funding and services and helping the places secure them.

The applicants who are not selected will still have benefited from the exercise of preparing the presentations. It will have allowed them to take a hard look at themselves and what they have to offer and what they need to improve.

Some of us think Belle Plaine needs to grow to improve. We visit places like some areas of Des Moines, Edgewood Road in Cedar Rapids, San Marnan Drive in Waterloo or Elmore Avenue in Davenport and dream of what our city would be like if we had one-tenth of the commercial development those areas have. For others, the lure of Belle Plaine is the fact that we don't have stoplights on every block and don't necessarily have to drive across vast expanses of parking lots to reach the stores we want to visit.

But a community that doesn't grow and improves will soon die. Belle Plaine is already a Great Place in the minds of many of us who live here. Now, let's hope we can convince the citizen advisory board to love us as much as we do. Good luck to our local committee as they make their final preparations for the presentation and thanks for all of your great work!



BY JEFF ORVIS

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From Page:
2
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